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Joanne Segal Brandford

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Joanne Segal Brandford was born in Philadelphia in 1933. She received her BA in decorative art in 1955 and her MA in design in 1967 from UC Berkeley, with Ed Rossbach. In addition to Berkeley, Brandford taught at Rhode Island School of Design, Montclair State College in New Jersey and at several institutions in greater Boston. Her awards included a New York State Artists Grant, Basket Maker-in-Residence at Manchester Polytechnic in England, Fellow at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, and Research Fellow in Textile Art at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard. In 1984 Brandford curated a traveling exhibition and catalog of North American baskets from the Peabody Museum entitled, *From the Tree Where the Bark Grows*; she curated *The North American Basket 1790-1976* at the Worcester Craft Center in Massachusetts, and *Our Shining Heritage: Textile Arts of the Slavs and Their Neighbors* at the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences in Binghamton, New York. She was Research Historian for the exhibition *Knots and Nets*. Brandford catalogued the Native American basket collection at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford. She had thirteen solo exhibitions, including the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, four shows at Amos Eno Gallery in New York, a retrospective at 171 Cedar Arts Center in Corning, New York, and a solo at the Cornerhouse Gallery in Manchester, England. A few traveling exhibitions of note: *Baskets: Redefining Volume and Meaning*, *Knots and Nets*, *The Art Fabric: Main Stream*, and *The Dyer's Art: Ikat, Batik, Plangi*. Her work appeared in the books of the two previous titles and in numerous other books and catalogues. Joanne Segal Brandford died in the spring of 1994.

Her mastery of handling materials in a remarkable variety of ways was fueled by the research and curatorial work she undertook. Her art is deeply rooted in the study of ancient textiles. Using a small sampling of the work, this review will try to demonstrate the relationship between her research and the expressive contemporary art she created.

The work has been divided into three imperfect sections: the early work, nets and baskets. They are mostly, but not completely, distinguishable by technique and chronology.

The earliest works are pieces from Brandford's graduate studies at Berkeley in 1965 and 1966. Her silk screen prints on fabric (fig. 1) are relatively simple curvilinear geometric designs. Her interest clearly was in using the screen in a free and innovative way, not in making exact repeats. Sometimes she cut and pieced her designs to achieve that end. At others times she manipulated the screen in simple but unorthodox ways for hand screen printing, as in figure 1, where the screen is rotated 180 degrees in the second horizontal row.

During this time she became expert in the use of vat dyes. Unlike the fiber reactive dyes most commonly used by artists in recent years, indigosol vat dyes are dull, grayish pastes when they are being applied to cloth. The true color is not revealed until the final stage of processing. Thus color selection is significantly more complicated.

In addition to screen printing, Brandford made tie-dyed fabrics during her graduate studies. In figure 2, her preference for slightly muted shades, typical of indigisol dyes, remained unchanged. She used stitching, binding, folding, pleating and wrapping, achieving delicate patterning and subtle shifts of color.

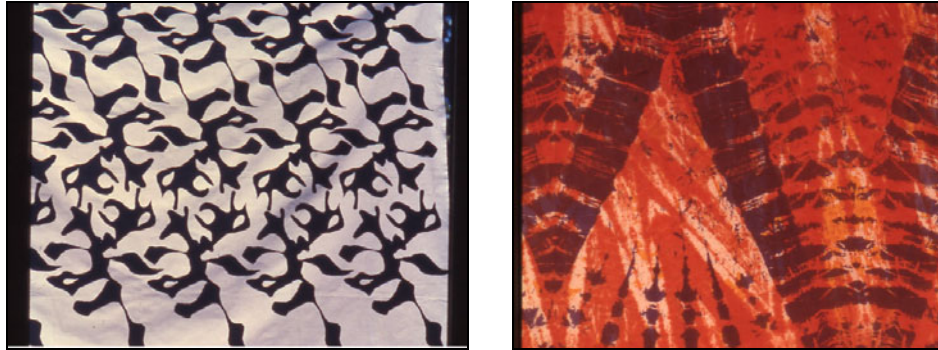


Figure 1 (left). Silk screen, 1965, cotton.

Figure 2 (right). Tie-dye, 1966, cotton.

The early weavings, made between 1970–74, were ikat-dyed. She never lost her interest in applied color. In *Deception for Moni* the bold red, white and blue warp is unmuted by the yellow ochre weft in a narrow vertical strip on one side. *Fragment Series II* (fig. 3) from 1973, a multi-colored double ikat in plain weave with supplementary weft, illustrates her achievement as a master dyer.

The last group of early works are sprang pieces designed for the wall or as three-dimensional objects, the first pieces revealing Brandford's interest in sculptural form. She began working in sprang in the early 1970s, and continued to use this technique for the rest of her life. *Spring* (fig. 4) from 1973, is in Jack Lenor Larson's influential book, *The Dyers Art*. Here, she explored the possibility of combining ikat with sprang construction in which there is a single set of what Irene Emery calls "undifferentiated elements."

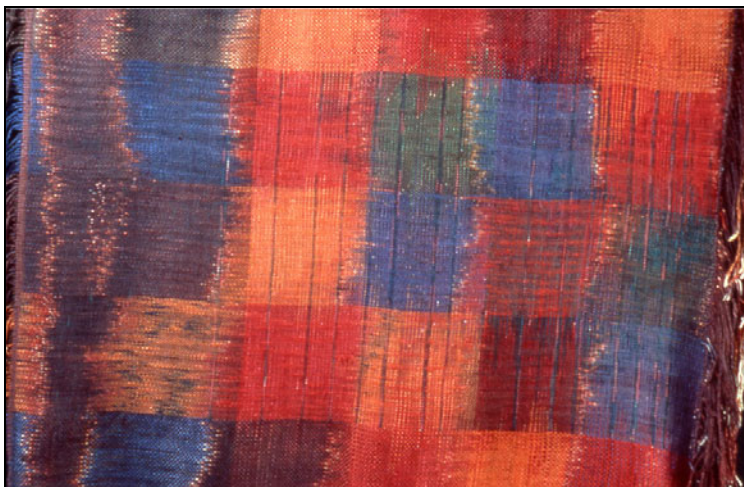


Figure 3 (left). *Fragment Series II*, 1973, 36" x 49", linen.

Photo: Hillel Berger.

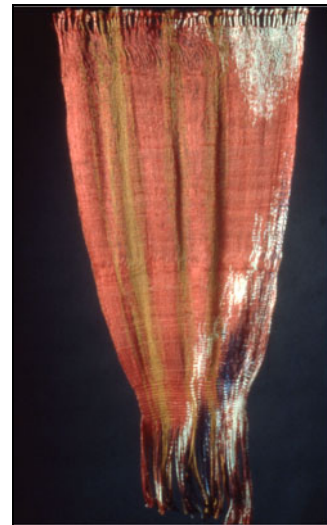


Figure 4 (right). *Spring*, 1973, 25" x 19", linen.

Photo: Hillel Berger.

These elements, much like a warp, interlink obliquely. A single horizontal element stabilizes the entire structure of the cloth. Garment-like *Half* (fig. 5) made almost ten years later in 1985 and figure 6 is her first three dimensional sprang and among the first works made with nylon.

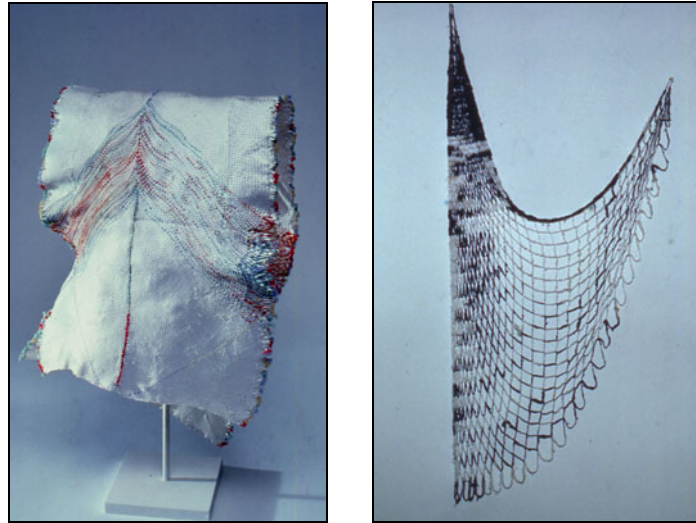


Figure 5 (left). *Half*, 1986, nylon, cotton.

Figure 6 (right). *Black/White Net Series I*, 1975, 22" x 56", cotton and silk.

Nets comprise the second group of works. Brandford made both knotless and knotted nets from the late 1960s. During the earlier years, 1975–85, the nets were flexible fabrics designed mostly for the wall. She wrote that while a graduate student at Berkeley she “became intrigued by certain similarities between the structures and techniques of traditional baskets and those of netted laces, and at that time I began to make nets. Initially I was inspired by the beautifully patterned knotless netted bags of South America as well as European needle-made laces, but as I became aware of the variety and strength of traditional netting throughout the world, I felt encouraged to continue and expand my own explorations” (Press, 16).

Black-White Net Series I (fig.6) from 1975 is the first of a group of three ikat nets in that sparkling combination. Here the pattern areas are large and flowing. Imagine how the cloth would move back and forth in your hands, with its weight and pliability so responsive to gravity, the pattern of the ikat changing as the squares become diamonds. In *Black-White Series II* Brandford played with the illusion of the shadow cast by the nets to visually enlarged the image of the work.

Red-Green II (fig. 7) from 1977-78, is two nets hung with space between them to take even greater advantage of the shadows. Two patterns are layered as well as two colors. The perception differs depending upon which side of the layered nets the viewer stands. This is a magical work of art, a drawing in air.

Brandford said that when she finished the basic knotted net, *Embroidered Net* (fig. 8) 1977, was not fully resolved. The little puffs of thread at each intersection were already in place. Her solution was to embroider the entire net with ikat threads, covering each

horizontal and vertical element of the net with stitches. Please note the irregular bottom border.

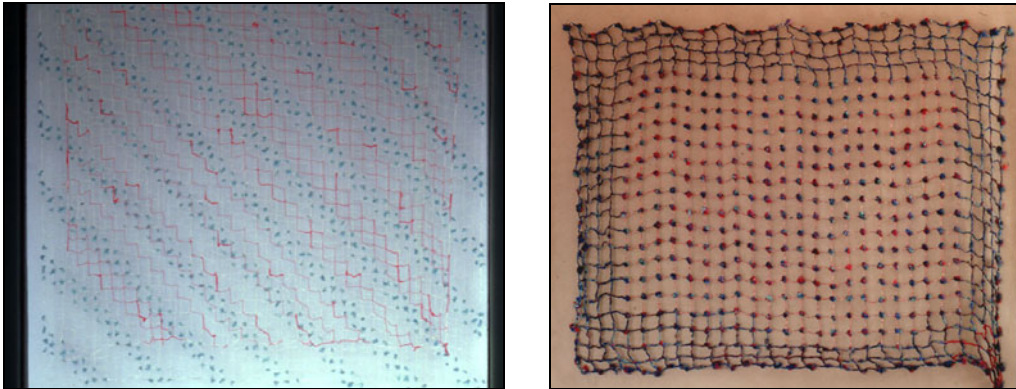


Figure 7 (left). Red/Green Net II, 1977-78, ca. 60" x 40", linen and cotton.
Figure 8 (right). Embroidered Net, 1975, 45" x 39", synthetic fibers and silk.

Scaffolded Silk (fig. 9) from 1982, is made with elongated interlinked looping, with the scaffolding used to support construction left in place. As Nancy Neumann Press explains in her essay in the catalog *Knots and Nets*, "The uppermost edge of the first row of looping is cast over a horizontal cord (which is stretched between two vertical supports). A second cord, stretched at the desired interval below the first, forms the bottom edge of the first row of loops. On completion of the first row of loops, a third cord is stretched below the second, and the top-most edge of that row is made by passing the top loops of the second row through the bottom loops of the first row, thereby connecting the two rows" (10).

Untitled (fig. 10) from 1987, in nylon and polyester, was a pivotal piece. She worked larger than ever before, and with a blatantly synthetic, colorless material selected for its complete transparency. Brandford here created a work of considerable size with almost no substance, a visually fragile and ephemeral work. Does she want us to see this net or only a ghost of it in its cast shadow, or in the light it reflects? Is life so fragile that it's almost beyond our grasp? Brandford wrote, "Recently I have explored the ideas of ...spatial ambiguity. Illusion, especially the question of shadow and substance (real/not real) has been of particular interest" (Press 16). She investigates this idea by using almost invisible materials that rely on light refraction and shadows to give substance to their presence.



Figure 9. Scaffold Silk, 1982, 9.5" x 13", silk.



Figure 10. Untitled Net, 1987, 6' x 11' x 6.5' (variable), nylon and polyester.

Her two nets, *Body Scan I* and *Body Scan II* from 1988 and 1989 are life size nylon nets with embroidery, scant images suggesting human figures. They are like instantaneous wall drawings, but of course, they were not instantaneous. According to Brandford, the act of netting “demands my active participation. Every step of the building process requires my awareness and physical control” (Press, 12).

Brandford made a large group of transparent synthetic fiber nets. Photographing them was a considerable challenge, making it difficult to share the work with galleries, museums and other potential exhibitors and buyers.

She moved on to other materials in her baskets, the third and final group of works. She said, “I am not a basketmaker. My ‘baskets’ are not really baskets. I think they are images of baskets ...my goal...(is) to bring an increased sense of volume to the nets, and to have them stand on their own, independent, defying gravity” (Pulleyn, 93). All of Brandford's baskets are nets or sprang. None are made with the traditional basketry techniques of coiling, twining or plaiting, although she was, of course, familiar with the traditional techniques through her extensive research of North American and other baskets. The baskets are mostly made of rattan and pandanus, often painted or dyed.

Basket IV (fig. 11) from 1981, “...defies its lacy appearance. (This basket and others to come are)... made of elongated interlinked looping After five rows of looping were completed, the 'fabric' was turned ninety degrees and formed into a box-like cylinder, (dyed) rattan, was looped when damp and flexible; after it dried, it maintained its relative rigidity to support the vertical form” (Press, 10).

Basket Torso (fig. 12) from 1983 shows Brandford's on-going interest in the figure. There is visual affinity between the rounded standing form and the human body. Painted rattan strips are barely contained by the material that binds them into place. It is a figure in powerful motion. For Brandford, "The main thing about the activity of making knotted and knotless loops is that the end of a strand is pulled through itself, as an extension of my hand, connected to the rest of me" (Malarcher, 26).



Figure 11 (left). Basket IV, 1981, 21" x 12", rattan.

Figure 12 (right). Basket-Torso, 1983, 19.75" x 19.5" x 14", rattan, pandanus.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Untitled Basket (fig. 13) is in the collection of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. Here Brandford makes a miraculous container from three arcs of bamboo and a netting of fragile tendrils. One of the things that is striking about Brandford's work is the absence of easy solutions or repeated formulas. Each piece provides a new situation, a new encounter.

Blue Bowl (fig. 14) from 1987, is one of the first sprang baskets. She said: "I love the idea that (this is)...completely integral in itself...with only one weft at the center, and no cut edges" (Malarcher, 26).

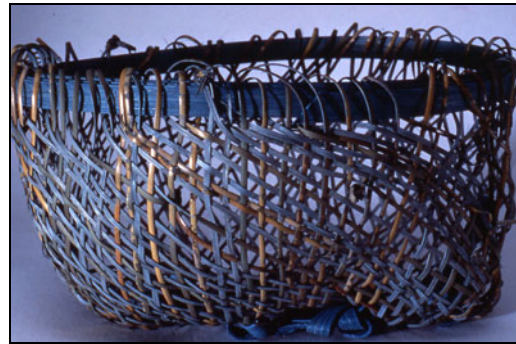
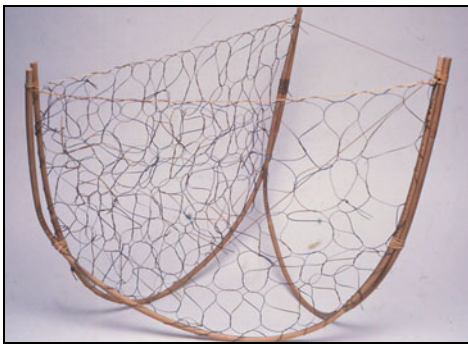


Figure 13 (left). Untitled Basket, 1986, 19" x 22.5" x 17", rattan and cotton.

Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY.

Figure 14 (right). Blue Bowl, 1987, 5.75" x 10" x 9.25", rattan.

In 1990 she became a Fellow of the New York Foundation for the Arts. She used the award to build an extension on her house to enlarging her small studio space. Brandford then began to work on a larger scale. *Icarus Wing* (fig. 15) from 1991, is more than 30 inches in its longest dimension. The sprang baskets have a remarkable delicacy.

In *Bursting Basket* (fig. 16) from 1992, Brandford's way of working seems to involve a moment by moment awareness of possibilities as her intention is molded by process. After mastering a skill, she put that knowledge out of mind in order to work directly and spontaneously with her materials.

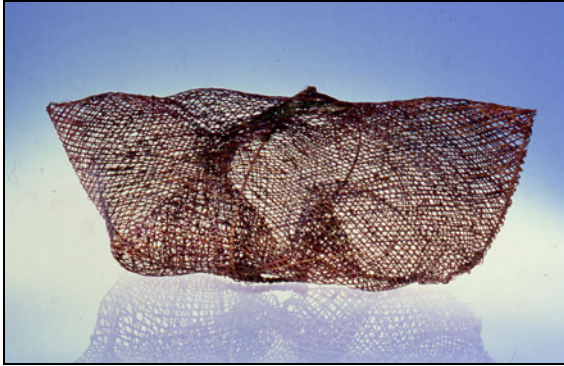


Figure 15 (left). Icarus' Wing, 1991, 10.5" x 30.5" x 19", rattan, pandanus, and steel.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Figure 16 (right). Bursting Basket, 1992, 18" x 22" x 12", rattan.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Reclining Figure (fig. 17) from 1992, is life size. Pat Hickman called it a "breathing basket" (Hickman, 8). The artist maintains the tension between the inside and the outside despite the openness of the form. There is a strong element of abandon and imperfection.

Shelter (fig. 18) from 1993, is part of her last group of pieces. Brandford's titles became increasingly self-reflective. Her heart failing, she knew her time was limited.



Figure 17 (left). Reclining Figure, 1992, 21" x 60" x 32", rattan.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Figure 18 (right). Shelter, 1993, 9.5" x 24" x 25", rattan and kozo.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

In *Was* (fig. 19) and *Self* (fig. 20) both from 1993, the asymmetry and idiosyncratic twists and turns beautifully express a not-quite-perfect human touch.



Figure 19 (left). *Was*, 1993, 11" x 23" x 14", rattan.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Figure 20 (right). *Self*, 1993, 18" x 20" x 13", rattan, mixed media.

Photo: Andrew Gillis.

Brandford developed a personal mode of expression which clearly distinguishes her work. She was a unique artist and thinker who internalizing her observations, responded to the most fragile and delicate of materials and processes, and found a singular clear and vibrant voice.

I work to continue and extend basketry tradition. I do not copy the old baskets, neither do I use traditional techniques and materials; rather I explore this form, this idea, and push it as far as I can.

There is no aspect of the tradition which is uninteresting to me; my work is informed and enriched by the strength, sensitivity, diversity, and generosity of basket makers of all times, including our own. Baskets are often linked to domesticity and smallness, the implication being that these qualities preclude significant art work. I could counter with basket-shrines made for ritual, or I could point to house-sized baskets (used indeed, as houses), and so I could 'elevate' baskets with religious significance or architectural scale. But all such uses/meanings refer to our humanity, and consequently to ourselves and our families, to life and death. What can be more meaningful for an artist working in fiber, than to honor the basket, with its myriad human associations (Hickman, 44).

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